

# As the 16-Year-Old Sculptor Saw Lincoln

By H. O. BISHOP

IT SEEMS to be the prevailing impression with many people that not until quite recent years have American women accomplished anything worth-while outside of the realm of housekeeping and school teaching.

To those who are under that impression, it will doubtless be an agreeable surprise to learn that more than half a century ago, a young girl, still in her teens, was given an order by the federal government for a statue of Abraham Lincoln.

Her name was Vinnie Ream.

This dainty little lass had the distinction of being the first woman in America to be thus honored by the United States Government.

Her life-like statue of Lincoln is one of the most attractive works of art in the Capitol at Washington. It stands directly opposite the main entrance to the rotunda.

The career of this most lovable and highly talented woman was of such a character as well calculated to fire the ambition of every girl in this country with the possibility of accomplishing big things in life. No girl can read about the career of Vinnie Ream without absorbing inspiration.

When she began her daily visits to the White House to make her study of the great President, Miss Ream was only sixteen years old. Many years later she described her experience in these simple but heart-touching words: "The opportunity I had to study Abraham Lincoln was, indeed, unusual, because of its intimacy and because of the unusual conditions under which I saw him. When I knew him and spent half an hour daily with him while modeling my statue, he was nearing that greatest of tragedies in American history,



Statue of Abraham Lincoln, modeled by Vinnie Ream when only 16 years of age. This is one of the Art attractions in the National Capitol at Washington.

the assassination in the theater. So I knew the ultimate man. I met him also as an impressionable young girl of sixteen, and the intuitions of such a child as I was are very apt to be correct. The mind at that age is as plastic as clay and receives an impression as readily, and that impression is likely to harden and be permanently retained. At sixteen I was mature enough to grasp very well the character of the man. So, I think, I am in a position which gives me an advantage over almost anyone else in the world with reference to personal impressions of the war-time President.

"Lincoln had been painted and modeled before, and when friends of mine first asked him to sit for me he dismissed them wearily until he was told that I was but an ambitious girl, poor and obscure. He granted me sittings for no other reason than that I was in need. Had I been the greatest sculptor in the world I am quite sure I would have been refused.

"I came for half an hour every day. I was the merest slip of a child, weighing less than ninety pounds, and the contrast between the raw-boned man and me was indeed great. I sat demurely in my corner and begged Mr. Lincoln not to allow me to disturb him. It seemed that he used this half hour as a time for relaxation, for he always left instructions that no one was to be admitted during that time.

"He seemed to find a strange sort of companionship in being with me, although we talked but little. His favorite son, Willie, had but just died, and this had been the greatest personal sorrow in a life that was mostly sorrowful. I made him think of Willie. He often said so and as often wept.

"I think that history is particularly correct in writing Lincoln down as the man of sorrow. The one great, lasting, all-dominating impression that I have always carried of Lincoln has been that of unfathomable sorrow, and it was this that I tried to put into my statue. When he sat for me I believe that he let himself go and fell into the mood that was ever within him, but against which he struggled. He never told a funny story to me. He rarely smiled.

"I remember him especially in two attitudes. The first of these was with his great form slouched into the chair at his desk, his huge feet extended, his head bowed on his chest, deeply thoughtful. I think he was, during those moments, following in mind some such thing as the operation of the army of Grant against Richmond, appraising the horrible sacrifices that every day brought upon the people of his nation, feeling that all the deaths that wisdom and forethought might prevent would and should be laid at his door. He was hearing the cries of suffering that were coming from the prisons and the sobs of the mothers for sons, lost like his own.

"The second attitude that he most often assumed was by the window that looked out upon the White House lawn. I always thought that when he stood by the window he was looking out for Willie, for he had watched the boy play many an afternoon from that very window. It was as he stood by the window that the great tears would course down his hollow cheeks, and he would be forced to dry them with his handkerchief. On two or three occasions he was so broken with his grief that he sank into a chair by the window and wept aloud. A big, strong man broken by grief is always a tragic thing to see, but never was there grief equal to Lincoln's.

"In all the months that I had my daily half hour with Lincoln the order that we were not to be interrupted was broken but twice, and in each of these interruptions the breach was strangely illustrative of the character of the man. The first person who intruded upon the rest hour was a woman of middle age. She was the mother of a boy who had worn the grey and who had been captured and was in the old Capitol prison.

"The mother wanted a pass to see her boy, and such a pass required the signature of the President. Lincoln listened graciously to the woman's plea, wrote a pass with his own hand and apologized that the boy was being kept from his home. The second woman was young and pretty, and she blushed when she started, falteringly, to state her mission. The President anticipated her request, said that he knew by her blushes that she wanted to see a sweetheart, and granted her request in advance.

"These visits to the White House continued for five months. Through all this time the personality of Lincoln was gradually sinking deeper and deeper into my soul. I was modeling the man in clay, but he was being engraven still more deeply upon my heart.

"Then finally came the great tragedy. I was in our house on Capitol Hill that terrible night. My parents had been out for the evening. They returned about midnight and as they were entering the house someone hurrying past called out to them that the President had been murdered. The murder of the President of a great nation is a most terribly tragic thing at best. I well remember how thoroughly awed were all the people I met at the time of the assassination of Garfield and of McKinley. That the assassin should reach so high appalls even the person who has no personal tie to that dignitary.

"So of course I was moved beyond measure at the death of Lincoln. I was prostrated. It was days before I could pull myself together and realize that the thing had actually happened. I think the horror of it may have had the effect of impressing even more vividly upon me the personality of the martyred President. The success of the statue that I subsequently



Vinnie Ream at work on Lincoln bust, from portrait painted by Gen. George C. Bingham.

made was attributed to its trueness to the actual Lincoln. My ability to produce it was unquestionably due to those half hours in the quiet of the President's office, and to the searing in of the image by the great tragedy."

It must not be supposed that the governmental authorities commissioned Miss Ream to make a statue of Lincoln without competition. On the contrary, all of the great sculptors of that period submitted models. The committee, after many weeks of careful study, decided that the model offered by the little Ream girl surpassed all others, and she was consequently given the commission for the statue, for which she received \$10,000. This enabled her to spend several years in Europe completing her education in art.

Her statue, "The West," has been presented to her native state of Wisconsin, and is now in the state capital at Madison.

Miss Ream was the first white child born in Madison—September 25, 1847. When a child her father went to Washington to live, having secured a position there. Several years later the family moved West again, and she was educated at Christian College, Missouri. During the Civil War the family returned to Washington, and Miss Ream became a government clerk, working in the Post Office Department. She was only fifteen at that time, and did not have the least idea that she possessed any talent as a sculptor. The discovery of her artistic talent was purely accidental. She had been asked for a photograph of herself by the little college in Missouri which she had attended, but Major Rollins, a friend of the family, thought it would be much nicer to furnish a head of the girl modeled in clay. He therefore took her to the studio of Clark Mills. It was the first time she had seen a sculptor at work, and it filled her with strange delight.

"Why, I could do that," she laughingly exclaimed. "All right, little girl," said the sculptor, "here is a piece of clay, see what you can do with it." Much to the surprise and delight of Mills she produced a fairly good likeness of him. That was the beginning of her great career. Every day for the next few years was devoted to hard work and study. She still stuck to her job in the Post Office Department, but each afternoon when through work she would hurry off to the Mills studio, where she modeled under the instruction of the genial Mills. After supper she would go to her room and far into the night would study books on anatomy. She worked so hard that the natural roses faded from her cheeks, and her little body became so thin that she only weighed 90 pounds. But she had found the real reason for being on earth, and her success was most marvelous.

What a vast difference there was in her coming to Washington after her triumphant years in Europe. She was beautiful, gifted, popular and reigned as leader of the social and artistic sets in the city where she had spent her girlhood as an obscure postal clerk. Then she met the popular and handsome Lieutenant Richard Hoxie, of the United States Army. Their wedding, which took place in 1878, was one of the most brilliant ever staged in Washington. President Grant was one of the guests, and the bride was given away by General Sherman. Lieutenant Hoxie, according to the customs of that period, felt that a wife's place was in the home, and that her interests should center in her husband and society. The young wife quite cheerfully gave up her art, and for 19 years made a home that was the envy of all Washington.

But true art is something that cannot be cast aside with ease or without cost. Sickness took possession of Vinnie Ream. The physicians told the husband she was going to die. "Only live, Vinnie!" he cried, "and I will give you back your art." Upon hearing this agonized promise she smiled sweetly, and from that moment she improved in a miraculous manner. True to his word, the husband remodeled their home at the corner of Seventeenth and K streets, Washington, in such a way as to provide a model studio, where the happy wife worked daily until her untimely death, November 20, 1914.

Vinnie Ream Hoxie rests in the National Cemetery at Arlington. Over her grave is a bronze copy of her statue of Sappho, one of the most beautiful of all her works.